DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 352 TM 026 752

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TITLE Visual Portraits: An Artistic Approach to Qualitative Educational Research.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Art Expression; Art Products; Data Analysis; *Educational Research; Foreign Countries; Profiles; *Qualitative Research; *Visual Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Portraits; *Researcher Subject Relationship

ABSTRACT

Traditional forms of research limit the nature of research inquiry, interpretation, and representation. Educational research that is informed by artistic practice is described in this exploration of visual portraits as images of the subjects of research. The research context was a 10-week adult education course titled "Design: Focus on Creative Process" taught at the School of Continuing Studies, University of Toronto (Canada). Six visual portraits were created to convey the integrity and diversity of six of the students. Unanticipated connections were revealed as the created image joined forms and experiences. The process of creating the portraits and their representations of the students' experiences is described in detail for three of the participants. The process benefited the research by: (1) showing the integrity of the artist as researcher; (2) creating coherence between visual portraits and research; (3) displaying the intimacy between researcher and participants; (4) showing the complementary nature of visual portraits and data analysis; and (5) showing the complementary nature of visual portraits and participant profiles. (Contains seven references.) (SLD)

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Visual Portraits: An artistic approach to qualitative educational research.

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ED 408 352

An arts-based approach to educational research is explored, focusing on the making of visual images as a vehicle for discovering and communicating meanings that emerge in the research process. Visual portraits are described as a way of gaining insight into the complexity and wholeness of research participants' experiences.

Traditional forms of research limit the nature of research inquiry, interpretation and representation. In contrast, what would educational research look like if the rigours and sensibilities of artistic practice were valued and visible? I have found that artistic attributes, such as, aesthetic perception, openness to unknowns, and intuitions of complex wholeness do enhance research practice.

Other writers have explored links between research and artistic experience, for example, Eisner (1991, 1993), Finley and Knowles (1995). In affirming the concept of researcher as artist and artist as researcher, these authors create a context in which other artist/researchers can articulate the meaning of their own experiences.

In this paper I exemplify educational research that is informed by artistic practice, in particular, my own experience as tapestry designer and weaver, and as adult educator of design and creative process. To appreciate how artistic experience can inform educational research requires an understanding of how making art is both a process of inquiry and a process of creating meaningful forms. Artistic practice is a unique activity of research and representation.

Background

The central ideas of this paper are grounded in my research into how adults learn to connect with their creativity. The research context was a ten week adult education course, "Design: Focus on Creative Process," that I developed and taught through the School of Continuing Studies, University of Toronto.

Facilitating self-reflection, visual image making, and dialogue throughout the course, I came to know each participant through their writing, imagery, art projects, exchanges in class and interviews. In direct response to both the subject of inquiry and the kind of process participants were engaged in, I felt an alternative form of research representation was needed.

Through experience of making visual imagery and facilitating others' imagery process, I have come to appreciate the expressive and evocative power of images. For example, I ask students to

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make marks on paper using crayons in a way that expresses their connection with words evocative of strong emotions. The personal images that emerge are unique. Everyone has a particular quality of experience associated with such emotions as, sadness, joy, anger, fear, peacefulness, and these qualitative differences are evident in the distinctive use of colour, shape and line that forms each image.

During my research process I made visual images at critical times to gain clarity and insight. While doing data analysis, I created six visual portraits to convey the integrity and diversity of my participants' experiences. Making the portraits was significant both as a methodology for interpretation and representation, and also as a means to maintain my own connection with artistic intuitive ways of knowing.

Perspective

Within the naturalistic paradigm of qualitative research, the knower is inseparable from the known. A researcher's sensitivity, empathy with others, and tolerance for ambiguity play an important part in the process and outcomes of research. According to Hunt (1992), a researcher's intentions, perceptions, and actions must be included in the research process because they are the "most powerful and sensitive means for recording and interpreting our research" (p. 116).

It follows that an educational researcher, as "human instrument" in the research process, needs to be responsive to tacit dimensions of his/her own and others' experiences. This takes practice; just as artists hone their skills and aesthetic awareness, so too researchers develop abilities to observe, attend to details and discover relationships of parts within a whole.

Tacit knowledge becomes known and expressed through symbolic forms. And, as Courtney (1987) states, "The tacit dimension, when symbolically expressed through a medium, is the domain of the arts in particular" (pp. 41-3). Artists engage in experiential inquiry, finding new ways to explore knowledge and meaning as they create. Visual images provide a way to connect with, represent, and give meaning to inner experiences. Images, as non-discursive expressions of feeling, convey previously unknown ideas in symbolic forms that have significance and bring understanding and insight (Langer, 1953).

The process of creating visual imagery probes below the level of the rational mind, and reveals what cannot be known from that perspective alone. Unanticipated connections can be discovered as an image creates relationships among diverse elements of form and experience and brings these into a new wholeness.

Visual Portraits

The idea to create visual portraits as an alternative way of representing my research emerged unexpectedly. I was working on data analysis, involved in the demands of categorizing interviews and participants' journal writings. Reading and re-reading, comparing and contrasting different aspects of what participants said or wrote, I felt close to their attitudes and perspectives. However, the sustained analytic process of segmenting and coding data made me want to have an image of the whole person.

Making visual portraits was a way to explore and represent my understanding of my participants and their creative process. Before describing key elements of this process, a note is necessary: The formal presentation of this paper is accompanied by the original images. What the reader of this article cannot see are the colours and forms of the images. Colour, line, shape, rhythmic relationship of parts within the whole all contribute a meaningful particularity to any image. Colour subtleties, intensities, contrasts, blending, repetitions, proportions are integral to the content conveyed.

I started the visual portraits by focusing on a participant whose passion and struggle to connect with her creativity made a strong impression on me. Lillian's words and images filled my thoughts. I picked up blue and black oil pastels and began to make a circular form. Gradually an image emerged as I intuitively integrated elements that I knew were important in Lillian's experience. I represented her strongly contrasting feelings primarily by creating a dichotomy between the left and right parts of the image. For example, on the left I worked with her favourite colours, blues and reds, which she linked to her emotional nature and feminine sensitivity. On the right, I made a plant-like form using yellow, orange and green, symbolizing the emergence of her direction of personal growth. Lillian rarely used these colours, but she recognized them as representing masculine qualities of intellect and assertion which she felt she needed to develop.

While making the portraits, I sought ways of connecting with and representing each participant's experience. I questioned how to make an image that reflected the integrity and complexity of who they were. In the process, my understanding deepened and my awareness of visual images as a way of making meaning increased. Continually seeking how to express relationships among complex ideas and feelings, I used colour and form to capture what I felt to be true to the participant and also to create a unified image. At times, I made "visual quotes" or references, working with materials, techniques, and elements of personal imagery that participants had explored. I also worked with ideas and attitudes that characterized their creative processes.

In one portrait, my guiding idea was the synthesis of a geometric pattern with a spontaneous

visual image. This integration of order and randomness let me capture two distinctive yet complementary aspects I saw in Bob, symbolizing the scope of his knowledge and openness. As an aerospace engineer, Bob knew about technical and mathematical aspects of creativity. However, his primary interest at the time of my work with him, was to explore spontaneous imagery and non-technical aspects of creativity.

Following are detailed stories of three participants and how I worked to convey their perspectives through visual imagery.

Marion, an oncology nurse, remembered that ever since she was young she wrote stories, poems, and songs which she sang to herself. As an adult she wanted to be able to write all the time, but she stopped on several occasions, believing she could not write well enough. During the course she began to write again. Through her writing, I discovered a woman with a certain wildness of spirit and longing for freedom and creative expression.

Marion took on a challenging project for herself during the course. She decided to make paper and make a book for her writings. She bought a blender, a book about paper making, and jumped into the process. Discouraged at first because the paper didn't turn out well, she persisted and gradually learned the steps to the process, adjusting her ideas to the needs of the materials. As she made more paper and got better at it, she enjoyed the process. She began to feel she could do something artistic, rather than always feeling that whatever she did would not work. Continuing to write poetry, she assembled small hand made paper books using a Japanese bookbinding technique she taught herself. Marion's last piece of writing at the end of the course intrigued me: "My turtle poem perhaps describes me and my perception of how I was involved in creative process."

I realized that a turtle image would be central to Marion's visual portrait. I began by cutting oval shapes from green tissue paper and combining them in layers with other papers, echoing her own paper and book making. I assembled nine multi-layered oval shapes - a central one surrounded by eight smaller ones, as plates on the back of a turtle. At this point, I realized the image needed something else. Remembering Marion's metaphor for herself as a place in nature, a fire warm and bright, I placed the green ovals on top of red paper, and the image became more lively.

Initially the background colour was black, but I added turquoise tissue paper, layered over blue construction paper. The black became a narrow border at the edge of the image. I recalled a spontaneous image Marion had made in class about her hopes and fears for the future. In this image, black represented everything that got in her way, and blue represented a force of "just doing what

really mattered." In her sequence of images, she had pushed the black out to the edges, making more space for the blue. I remembered this description of her imagery simultaneously with my response to the emerging portrait.

From Marion's writing, I selected key statements that represented different stages and perspectives of her experience of learning of herself as creative. I printed phrases on the top layer of the oval shapes. These words on the plates of the turtle's back, contain essence of Marion's story:

* Wanting a way to express myself.
* Having a burning desire to make something.
* Wanting to be proud of what I do.
* Writing, because if I don't I am denying myself.
* Earlier in my life I discounted my creativity. I never even tried because I believed I would fail.
* Wanting to share and not worry about what others will say.
* Convincing myself to do something and getting encouragement to keep trying.
* Learning that making something takes practice, frustration and self-doubt.
* It's going to be a long process - each day a little more exploration and trying.

In finishing this visual portrait, I realized it had a simplicity and child-like quality. The irregularities of torn paper edges resembled the rough edges of the Marion's hand made paper. Marion was not concerned with precision, I reminded myself, going against my own tendency for a "finished look."

Jody, a payroll accounts manager, had memories of finger painting as a child. She also remembered coming up with creative ideas for school projects but never feeling she knew how to achieve what she had in mind. She signed up for the creative process course because she wanted to find ways to do things she would gain pleasure from.

Jody felt "behind" others in the class who had already done some kind of art work. She felt she knew nothing and was just starting out. To begin with, she spent a long time in an arts supply store just looking at materials and deciding what she wanted to do. Eventually she decided to buy a sketch book and chalk pastels in order to start making images that expressed her feelings of seeing a sunset in the Rockies or a winter landscape. She knew she had passion for life, but she didn't let it out. She also knew she didn't have drawing skills, and so she wanted to simply follow her ideas and feelings as they flowed.

While Jody wanted to express her feelings "free-form without thought," she also had many ideas that inhibited her ability to express herself. For her visual portrait, I decided to do a series of spontaneous drawings related to expressions of emotions. This was an exercise she felt helped her get to know herself better.

Colour was the medium of choice for capturing and conveying Jody's passion and struggle. I did not plan the images. I explored the feeling behind words that Jody had used to describe her process. I sought to capture the dichotomy and friction between her sense of exploration and constraint. Using chalk pastels on a large piece of paper subdivided into eight sections, I made eight small images. Four images symbolized her expansive, exploratory side and four symbolized what held her back and stifled her.

Frida did clerical work in a small company that sold business machines. She did not like this work and felt disconnected from herself every day she worked there. She fervently wanted to reconnect with her creativity. When turning fifty-five she promised herself to do some creative work each day.

As a child in Argentina, Frida had learned many art and craft activities. She was very good at what she did but never received encouragement. She never felt valued for who she was. On the contrary, she was often ridiculed for showing her feelings. She learned early on to keep her feelings to herself and never express them.

After moving to Canada and discovering that she was still unhappy, she was helped by a therapist who asked her, "What do you like?" Realizing that she loved colour and form, she enroled at the Ontario College of Art where she studied for five years. However, Frida still did not believe she could ever do anything well enough, and after leaving the art college, she had long gaps between the times of doing creative work.

During the course, Frida worked on highly detailed colour pencil drawings of roses. She also showed me collages, especially one she made for her mother who was dying of cancer in Argentina. In making Frida's portrait, I worked with pencil crayons on a drawing about the size of her small flower drawings. First of all, I repeated the number five across the bottom of the image, representing the importance of her decision at fifty-five to commit herself to her creativity. Above the numbers I worked on a section evocative of roots, representing how deeply her creativity was rooted in her life experience.

For the centre of the image, I drew a candle holder that emerged from the ground and contained one tall candle and eight red roses. This part of the image was linked directly to the collage Frida had made for her mother; a collage in which Frida said goodbye to her mother who died before she had completed it.

There are qualities of longing, sadness and hope in this image. The grey area behind the

candle light represents Frida's sad memories of difficulties as a child, especially relating with her mother. The yellow diamonds are sparks of light. At the top of the image I drew a silver form of a bird in flight, in response to Frida's question, "When is it going to take off?" This question contained her longing to be able to keep a steady continuity of creative effort and expression.

The finished image has a delicate quality. Frida knew well how to do detailed shading and blending with colour pencils. While I was experimenting and learning throughout, I also tried to keep a lightness of touch and flow of movement while focusing on small details.

Each portrait was different in content, materials and approach, just as the lives and creative efforts of the participants were highly individual. Creating each portrait brought me new challenges and insights, but most importantly, I felt I lived with the individual's way of being and doing while making the portrait. In the end, I created images that embodied my understanding and feeling connection for each person.

Findings and Discussion

When beginning this research, I did not know I would incorporate art work. I did not set out to do art-based research. I thought the research process would be very different from what I did as an artist. However, encouraged to begin with myself, my artistic experience and long-standing interest in creativity naturally shaped the research inquiry and representation.

Reflecting on my experience of creating the visual portraits, I have identified five major ways in which the process benefited the research as a whole.

1. *Integrity of researcher as artist/artist as researcher.* Being able to act in accord with my values and knowledge from experience was significant. I was able to maintain connection with my intuitions, feelings and visual awareness. My energy was heightened through a creative process of moving towards a truthful image; an image resonant with the particulars of my own and others' experiences.

2. *Coherence between visual portraits and the research as a whole.* Making visual portraits was coherent with the subject of the research and the principles of "reflexivity, responsiveness and reciprocality" (Hunt, 1992) underlying my methodology. For example, I not only incorporated similar art materials and processes that participants used during the course, I also mirrored participants' experiences of risk taking by using certain art methods that I had little familiarity with.

3. *Intimacy of relatedness between researcher and participants.* In making the images I responded to a complex blend of impressions I experienced in relation to my participants. By seeking to understand their worlds in this way, I felt a depth of connection with each of them.

4. *Complementarity of visual portraits and data analysis.* While immersed in the details of research analysis, I found the visual portraits to be a way of apprehending subtleties, finding hidden relationships, seeing the whole. This involved a shift in mode of perception, thought and feeling, and the image itself expressed both complexity and unity.

5. *Complementarity of visual portraits and participant profiles.* Each portrait was a significant form for discovering and communicating my understanding of participants' experiences. A narrative accompanied each portrait, highlighting and expanding upon key ideas. In this way, visual and verbal representations coincided, giving different perspectives and a larger, more inclusive picture.

Using the metaphor "researcher as artist," Elliot Eisner (1991) has encouraged educational researchers to become more artistic in carrying out their research. Accompanying this vision of new approaches to qualitative research is the need for examining the processes, as well as the possible forms, of arts-based research. What unique ways of knowing are called upon and developed through an artistic process of investigating, seeing, feeling, being open, integrating, expressing?

An artist seeks to understand something about the world, about self, about materials and ways of making expressive forms. Engaging with materials, thoughts, and feelings, an artist participates in a search. This search to bring something into being requires attention to details, a sense of relatedness among all parts within a whole, and tolerance for the tension of not knowing what will emerge.

Simply stated, creative process goes something like this:

I work on something	[action/interaction]
Something works in me	[receptivity/transformation]
Something comes into being	[emergent form]
I come to know something	[emergent meaning]
Something becomes seen	[visibility to others]
I see myself	[self-visibility]

Through the practice of creating expressive forms and experiencing a depth of meaning and value in the process, an artist develops and refines affective, intuitive, aesthetic, and relational ways of knowing. Knowledge internalized through experience of engaging in creative process is a key value that an artist can bring to educational research.

Implications and Conclusions

Ways of being, knowing and doing that characterize artistic practice are not exclusive to artists per se. Certain qualities and approaches can be learned and implemented by those who want to engage in artistic processes. Researchers can develop their aesthetic awareness, increasing their ability to observe, reflect and create. This takes practice, but exercising artistic ways of knowing can extend a researcher's capacity to discover and represent meaningful patterns within complex phenomenon.

Eisner (1993) wrote, "As sensibility is refined, our ability to construct meaning in a particular domain is refined." For researchers who seek to access deeper layers of their own and their participants' experiences, visual image making offers a unique way of knowing in which meanings embedded in experiences can be brought to view and transformed. Researchers can learn new ways to give form to ideas and feelings from within. This process facilitates penetrating to the heart of the matter and gaining insights not possible through rational thought alone.

Arts-based approaches to educational research are important because they offer unique ways of understanding experience. Through valuing different ways of knowing, perceiving, and making meaning, an artist/researcher contributes holistic and intimate perspectives to educational research.

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